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THE CONVERSATION

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Norman Baker is one in a million, not a sign of the coalition's troubles

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Baker has caused many a bun fight in his time. Policy Exchange, CC BY

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Norman Baker's resignation from the Home Office can tell us a lot about Norman Baker, the maverick's maverick, the hippy at the Iron Maiden concert. It can tell us something about Theresa May, and show us in unusually revealing detail what it's like behind the scenes in one of the great offices of state. What it probably can't do is tell us a great deal about the state of the coalition – however much commentators wish it would.

Critics of the Liberal Democrats accuse Baker of trying to save his skin ahead of next year's election by distancing himself from May and her policies. But that's not why he resigned. In Baker's Lewes constituency, the Conservatives are the main threat. He has nothing to gain there by criticising them.

There's far more to his move than simple party politics. The fact that Baker is a Liberal Democrat and May a Conservative is one of the least important issues in this story. If it were that simple, coalitions would never exist. The individuals that hold office, and the office they hold, is where the important detail lies. Understanding this case hinges on two principle factors: the nature of Norman Baker and the nature of the Home Office.

Odd one in

I first met Baker in 1990 when we worked together as parliamentary researchers. We were, and still are, firm friends, but he cut a strange figure among the Lib Dem parliamentary researchers. He was ten years older than the rest of us and had spent those ten years running record shops, teaching English and working as a railway station master. We were cheerful amateurs, but Baker took himself and his job quite seriously. He was there to do good. He was rather different.

Typically he made the move from parliamentary researcher to MP, but less typically he did so via every layer of local government including parish, district and county, all of which he thoroughly enjoyed. He's always been a bit of a hippy, adhering to a strictly vegetarian diet, championing the cause of Tibet, animal rights, insisting on a ministerial bike instead of ministerial car. This isn't something he does for effect – he believes in things. He's someone who practises what he preaches.

These things all sound rather good and rare qualities in a politician, and indeed they are, but being different from the others isn't necessarily going to help in a game requiring team players and tribal instincts. What happened in the Home Office is, as such, not necessarily a reflection on the wider coalition.

Baker did, after all, enjoy a happy and successful stint at the Department for Transport. As a self-confessed train enthusiast, he was able to see through a number of pragmatic projects that he, the civil service and his Conservative counterpart could agree on.

But at the Home Office, political philosophy, rather than pragmatism or charm, rule the roost. Baker is an old fashioned liberal, drawn to the Liberals by the rousing words of Jo Grimond, well-read, well-versed and adored by his party. May is all these things equally to traditional Conservatives. The two appeared to bump along just fine on a number of big issues, like FGM and child abuse, but questions of personal liberty – such as drugs – were bound to cause trouble. Baker produced evidence to show that stricter drug laws would do nothing to affect drug use. It highlighted the limitations of a classic liberal and a classic conservative working together, and had no place in May's uncompromising Home Office.

Full life

But the end of his Home Office career is not likely to break Baker. He has made political enemies along the way, hounding Peter Mandelson out over the Hinduja Brothers passport scandal, repeatedly raising the spectre of MP's expenses and refusing to let the death of David Kelly pass without close scrutiny, and yet none of his political enemies have managed to trip him up.

He is a romantic, an appropriate representative for the rolling hills of his Lewes constituency. He seems happy to see his life in politics as genuinely just one part of his life. This may be precisely why the local baptist church calls him "Norman B the fab MP". Because he refuses to be needy. He has his family, he has his music, he has his home above a former ice-cream parlour, where he plays pinball and listens to 78s (arranged in catalogue order number, naturally), prepares for his weekly local radio show and writes songs.

The resignation of this unusual politician tells us most about him, not about the state of politics. It may reveal which issues will rumble on in future coalitions in the Home Office, but Baker is unlikely to be the first of many, or his resignation a crack that becomes a cavern in the coalition.

Baker's story may show us that while coalition requires compromise and pragmatism, for some politicians, there are limits. His came when an evidence-based drugs policy was thrown out but it would have come sooner or later on another issue where a clear philosophical difference existed between traditional liberals and traditional Conservatives. The point is that those issues are rare, and politicians like Baker are rarer still. He's not like the others, who are likely to hold firm until May 2015, and probably beyond.

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